Am-Biography

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Ann Wilkins

Missionary to Africa

..BY..

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Woman's Foreign Missionary Society
Methodist Episcopal Church

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ANN WILKINS

PIONEER MISSIONARY TO AFRICA

What does this old-fashioned name mean to us? Nothing, until we look backward and discover that it was borne by one whose life was linked with things that cannot perish.

Ann Wilkins was born "just back of West Point," N. Y., near the beautiful Hudson, of a sober ancestry, Quakers and Methodists. She was a precocious little lass, who could read at four years of age, and later busy herself with sampler and knitting work. At fourteen she was happily converted, and at nineteen began her work as a public school teacher. The next we know of her was when in 1836 she went to the camp meeting at Sing Sing, N. Y., and heard Rev. John Seys, just home from Africa, make an appeal for the Liberia mission.

This mission has a unique history. In 1819 Congress authorized the President to purchase in Africa a section where Africans, recaptured from slavers, and freed slaves from this country could find a safe home.

This was done, a "Colonization Society" was formed, and the American flag was raised in Liberia, as the new colony was called, in 1822.

It was not long before thousands of blacks were established there, and the question of Christian education became imminent. The Methodist

church sent its first representative in 1833,— the heroic Melville Cox — who was followed the same year by five others, one of whom was Sophronia Farrington, but none of whom were able to remain any length of time.

About two years later Rev. John Seys was sent to superintend the mission, and he it was who in 1836 was pleading for it at Sing Sing.

Dr. Nathan Bangs, Secretary of the Missionary Society, was presiding, and while the collection was being taken, a note was brought to him which read as follows: " A sister who has but little money at command gives that little cheerfully, and is willing to give her life as a female teacher if she is wanted." This was written by Ann Wilkins.

As a result she sailed the following year, on June 15, for Africa, a far distant and mysteriously dark land in those days. The slow sailing ship, the lack of comforts, and the long route made the mere journey a thing to be profoundly dreaded. And afterward,— the imagination dared not venture into that abode of " fearsome savages and cannibals."

But with the same quiet courage which characterized her entire life, this saintly young woman reached her " promised land," and immediately gathered a company of children and became their teacher.

Her work at White Plains Manual Labor School seems to have been very pleasant and effective, judging from her letters. But where have letters been preserved all these years? In a " little chintz bag," which belonged to the " First Directress " of the Female Missionary Society

organized in New York in 1819, auxiliary to the Parent Society which began its history but a few months earlier.

Mrs. Wilkins evidently bestowed upon her small Africans names famous in Methodism, for she mentions a Nathan Bangs, William McKendree, Peter Sandford, and James Lawrence. There is something very pathetic in the use of these names, as if the lonely missionary — and at one time she was our sole representative — could in that way surround herself and her pupils with the companionship of great and good friends.

One little girl bore the name of that "First Directress," and a specimen of her progress is shown enclosed in one of the letters which reads: "English grammar is the art of speaking and writing the English language correctly. This is one of my studies, and I think it a very useful one. Mary Mason."

Referring to this child Mrs. Wilkins says: "Mary is an extraordinary child for any country or any color. When I was sick she was a delightful little attendant in my room, ready to hear the lowest whisper, and attend with cheerfulness to my requests." When obliged to leave this school to take a vacant place, she wrote to "the lovely sisterhood of missionary spirits in New York," as follows: "I never had more agreeable employment in my life, and do not know that I can have, than at the White Plains Manual Labor School. Many reminiscences of my residence and employment there are delightful. I have already real-

ized what I proposed to myself before I came here. I said that if I might only live to teach some little native child to lisp the name of Jesus, I should be amply rewarded. I have left a number at White Plains who now can read his holy Word, who could not speak English a little over a year ago."

Twice in the twenty years this pioneer had to leave the fever-infested climate and return to America for brief furloughs, and in 1856 she was obliged to leave for the last time, after she had " wrought her beautiful work for the children of Africa at White Plains, Monrovia, and Millsburg." It is worthy of notice that at each of these places a church and school still exist.

We often ask ourselves in moments of doubt, " What was the outcome of such sacrifice and suffering? " It is a joy to find that Ann Wilkins's labor was not lost. We find the following in an article written by Mrs. North. After outlining her experience, she adds: "Let Bishop Hartzell's own words give the sequel:"

" Some years ago, representatives of Great Britain and Liberia went into the interior in West Africa, to settle some questions of boundaries between Sierra Leone, an English colony, and the Republic of Liberia. The day before Easter they arrived at the capital town of a native African tribe and arranged to stay in camp over Sunday. To their surprise they found that these people had refused to allow any Mohammedan missionaries to come among them. The chaplain of the

expedition was a member of our Liberia Conference, the Rev. W. H. Carter. On making inquiry as to why they refused to let the followers of Mohammed come among them, they said that years before some of their young people were in a school taught by Ann Wilkins, near Monrovia. They there had learned to read the Bible and to serve her God, and they had been waiting all these years for 'Ann Wilkins's God to come to them.'

"All the members of the expedition were impressed with the sincerity of these pagan people, and with their hearty concurrence held an interesting Easter service. When the meaning of Easter had been explained to them, the natives themselves made a crude banner and put on it their own legend about Jesus. The services were largely attended and greatly enjoyed. During the day a collection of nearly seventy-five dollars was made up and was afterward given to the conference in Monrovia in my presence, to be used in sending a missionary to these people. I am sorry to say that for lack of funds I doubt if the missionary has yet been sent."

After Mrs. Wilkins's last homecoming she seemed to rally, and at her earnest request was given a position in the New York Juvenile Asylum, but before she had begun to work her ardent spirit was released, and she went joyfully to her reward. At her funeral Bishop Janes said: "She lived nobly, died gloriously, and has entered into her rest! What

is there sad in this? Have not angels shouted over it? Has not God smiled upon it? So far as I understand the subject, there is but one thing I would have otherwise; I would have had her grave in Africa!"

She was buried on the farm where she spent her girlhood, but as the property passed to strangers the spot was neglected and in danger of being obliterated. This fact was brought to the attention of the sixteenth Executive Meeting of the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, and Mrs. Kennard Chandler was appointed to see that the sacred dust was removed. A beautiful site was given in Maple Grove Cemetery, Long Island, and the casket was there interred with appropriate ceremonies.

A monument was erected by the Society, bearing the following inscription: "Here lies Ann Wilkins, a Missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church to Liberia, from 1836 to 1856. Died November 13, 1857, aged 51 years. Having little money at command she gave herself. Erected by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society."